

The Iraq Dossier

International arms inspectors told the Security Council yesterday that they had not yet found any "smoking gun" proving Saddam Hussein's continued manufacture of unconventional weapons. That increases pressure on the Bush administration to share more of what it knows about the state of Iraq's biological, chemical, nuclear and missile programs. Less than three weeks remain until Jan. 27, when the inspectors are to provide a more comprehensive report. If Washington hopes to persuade the world and the American people that Baghdad has forfeited its chance for a peaceful solution, it will need compelling evidence to support its case.

It is probably unrealistic to expect revealing photographs of weapons production lines. In an era of satellite surveillance, countries with something to hide long ago learned how to conceal their secrets from aerial cameras. Using other forms of intelligence, however, the United States claims to have assembled a persuasive case. Also in recent days, America has been providing more intelligence help to the weapons inspectors, a process that should accelerate now that the U.N. has the resources on the ground to put those tips to immediate use before Baghdad can spirit away incriminating evidence.

Successive U.N. resolutions place the burden of proof on Iraq, not Washington or the arms inspectors, to demonstrate that all unconventional weapons programs have been terminated and that known or unaccounted-for stocks of biological and chemical warfare ingredients have been verifiably destroyed. The 12,000-page declaration Iraq submitted last month conspicuously failed this test. It offered no adequate explanation of what happened to more than 500 artillery shells containing nerve gas and 400 bombs suitable for delivering germs and toxins. It didn't credibly account for more than two tons of

material used to produce biological weapons. It failed to mention new efforts to acquire uranium and raised more questions than it answered about preparatory work on unmanned drones and longer-range missiles. Since handing over that report, Iraq has not provided satisfactory answers for these omissions, implausibly contending that relevant records and materials are simply missing.

These evasions have not satisfied Hans Blix, the U.N.'s chief weapons inspector, who has complained that while Iraq has not directly interfered with his inspectors, it has failed to provide the active cooperation required to complete their mission. In a country as large and tightly controlled as Iraq, the inspectors will never be able to assure themselves without active help from the government that deadly illegal weapons ingredients aren't hidden somewhere.

Yet for all the Iraqi maneuvering, America cannot simply declare Baghdad to be in violation of U.N. requirements and then go immediately to war. The political, economic and military implications of combat — not to mention the potential loss of American and Iraqi lives — demand every effort by the United States to resolve this confrontation short of war. That may involve extending the period for inspections, and certainly requires Washington to return to the Security Council for further deliberation before turning to the use of force. The presence of tens of thousands of American troops in the region and the return of uncomfortably hot weather in the spring are not reasons to start fighting before every diplomatic option has been exhausted.

There can be no wavering from the goal of disarming Iraq, but all chances of doing so peacefully should be explored before the world is asked to decide on war. Before that point is reached, Washington should share its evidence with the public.